

The Venerable Dr. King & Fire Station No. 6

What does Fire Station No. 6 Museum have to do with Dr. Martin Luther King?

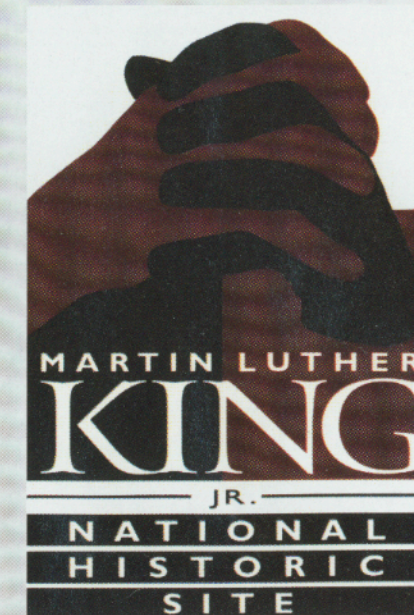
Why did the National Park Service restore the fire station?

Carol S. Ash

These are often the first questions visitors ask as they gather in Fire Station No. 6 Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, to begin their tour of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site. Interpretive park rangers introduce visitors to the national historic site and Dr. King's "Sweet Auburn" community in Fire Station No. 6 Museum before walking to the Birth Home, just three doors up the street.



THE KING CENTER



Since the historic site was established in 1980, the U.S. National Park Service has committed time, money, human resources, and passion to protecting and interpreting the places where Dr. King was born, where he lived, worked, and worshiped, and where he is buried. In addition to touring the Birth Home, visitors can listen to the reverend's sermons in historic Ebenezer Baptist Church and see personal artifacts of Dr. and Mrs. King in Freedom Hall at The King Center. Included in the preservation has been Fire Station No. 6, the station that served Dr. King's "Sweet Auburn" community for ninety-seven years.

SWEET AUBURN'S STATION

Fire Station No. 6 went into service on May 31, 1894. Foreman John Terrell commanded seven men, a horse-drawn hose wagon, and four horses. In the book *Living Atlanta*, E.B. Baynes, a resident of the community in the early 1900s remembers:

Oh, it was interesting. When they received the alarm they had a big bell and it bonged. And when it did, it alerted those horses, and if they were

lying down or munching hay or what-not, right away they were eager to go. They stood still, and they had a contraption that dropped the harness down over their bodies. And the firemen then led the horses out of the stalls and backed them up to the wagon and fastened the harness to the wagon, and they were gone, it looked like, a couple of minutes from the time the alarm came in.

The station quickly became a distinctive part of the community. Built on a vacant lot at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Boulevard, Fire Station No. 6 is a two-story brick Romanesque Revival structure. The front façade features an arched fire-apparatus entrance and a series of five Italianate arched windows on the second floor. The cornice line on two sides of the building is an outstanding example of ornamental brickwork. A diamond design in brick is topped by a row of small brick arches along the Boulevard and Auburn Avenue sides of the building. Fire-breathing terra-cotta lions flank the row of arched windows.

The station had another unique feature—an inclined hose room. The hose

room took the place of a fifty-foot tower normally used to dry the standard length of canvas hose. The stable for the horses was at the rear of the building.

In 1914 the station was mechanized and the horses removed. The community also changed. As the racist Jim Crow laws increasingly separated blacks from whites, the Sweet Auburn neighborhood changed from a predominately German-American neighborhood to a black community.

During the 1930s, young Martin Luther King often watched as the alarm bell rang and the engine left the station. He and his younger brother Alfred Daniel, known as A.D., would shoot hoops on a basketball court behind the station while the white firefighters were on duty. Young Martin and his friends could only dream of riding the truck out of the station as firefighters; by law, blacks could not actually work in the fire station at the time. Ironically, though King could not have become a firefighter in the 1930s or 1940s, the movement he led in the 1950s and 1960s would pave the way for integration of Station 6 and the entire Atlanta Fire Department.

The Atlanta Fire Department was segregated until 1963. When the department hired its first black firefighters, they were all assigned to Fire Station No. 16. Before long, Station 6 became the first of the truly integrated stations, with black and white firefighters working together. Assistant chief Joseph Tolbert remarked, "It really doesn't matter what color a hand is. If you are a firefighter and you are in trouble in a burning building, you are going to reach out and they are going to grab it."

Station 6 developed a reputation for excellence. Bobby Adair, thirty-two-year veteran of Station 6, noted, "No. 6 was it. It was in the hot spots. If they had a help call, you [could] count on 6 coming." Harold Roserman, one of the original sixteen black firefighters at the station, recalled in an oral history interview, "Station 6 had quite a reputation for fighting fires, especially single-family fires. They had a lot of what we call shotgun houses in the area. Station 6 would have the fire out before other companies would arrive on the scene."

But a reputation for putting out fires was not enough. Eventually the newer twelve-foot-wide fire engines would not fit through the eight-foot-wide curved wood doors of Station 6. In addition to inadequate space, structural deterioration contributed to the closing of the station. Although neighborhood residents fought to save the station, its life as a working fire station ended in 1991. At the time of its closing, it was Atlanta's oldest operating station. Of the seven stations built at the turn of the twentieth century, Station 6 is the only one still standing.

NEW LIFE FOR AN OLD STATION

By 1996, Station 6 had a new role to play in the Sweet Auburn community as both a museum and a headquarters for

the interpretive division of the historic site. In 1994 the city of Atlanta and the National Park Service completed a lease agreement allowing Martin Luther King Jr. NHS to "rehabilitate, occupy, use, and maintain the Lease Premises as a fire station museum." In addition, the lease agreement stated that the museum will "commemorate the use of the fire station during the historic period of the twentieth century, especially the 1920s and 1930s when the Martin Luther King, Sr. family lived in the neighborhood."

Restoration work, begun in 1995, included replacement of the roof, removal of nonhistoric beige paint from the exterior, and repointing of the brickwork. Two of the original brass sliding poles remain, as well as the original alarm bell. A restored 1927 American LaFrance Metropolitan Pumper Hose Car, watch desk, and telegraph machine are on exhibit in the museum. A small permanent exhibit presents a brief history of the station and the integration of the Atlanta Fire Department. Historic photographs and a video presentation based on oral-history interviews with current and former firefighters make up the exhibit.

Since opening in June 1996, Station 6 serves as the starting point for tours of Dr. King's Birth Home. The Eastern National Cooperating Association bookstore operates from the rear of the first floor, and the interpretive rangers occupy the entire second floor.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Although the intent of the station restoration was to create a museum depicting life in a 1930s working fire station, little interpretation has been done in the past six years. Two commemorative events have been held at the station: the grand opening ceremony in 1996 and the fiftieth anniversary of the Winecoff Hotel fire of 1946, the deadliest hotel fire in U.S. history. Two temporary exhibits have informed visitors about the Winecoff Hotel fire and the "Great Northside Conflagration" of 1917. During the twentieth anniversary of the historic site in 2000, the historic site, in cooperation with the Atlanta Fire Department, sponsored an open house for local schoolchildren. Three interpretive labels identify Station 6, the fire engine, and the telegraph machine.

Restoration of Fire Station No. 6 was



Left: Fire Station No. 6 as it appears today. Above: an architectural detail identifies the station.

part of the development that occurred throughout Atlanta in preparation for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. After the Olympic development rush ended, Station 6 dropped below other projects for financial and staffing resources. Periodically members of the interpretive staff discussed ideas for improving interpretation of the fire station, but nothing concrete developed.

Then came September 11, 2001. Staff at the historic site watched in the visitor center theater via satellite as the day's events unfolded. Images of firefighters rushing toward the World Trade Center towers, carrying fallen comrades to safety or raising the American flag, touched us all. Several weeks later, superintendent Frank Catroppa approved a suggestion to invite interested people to a meeting to discuss the future of Fire Station No. 6 Museum. With such a positive attitude about the fire service, it seemed like the ideal time to bring people together to develop the mandate stated in the lease agreement.

At both commemorative events held at Station 6, current and former members of the Atlanta Fire Department and other people interested in the fire service

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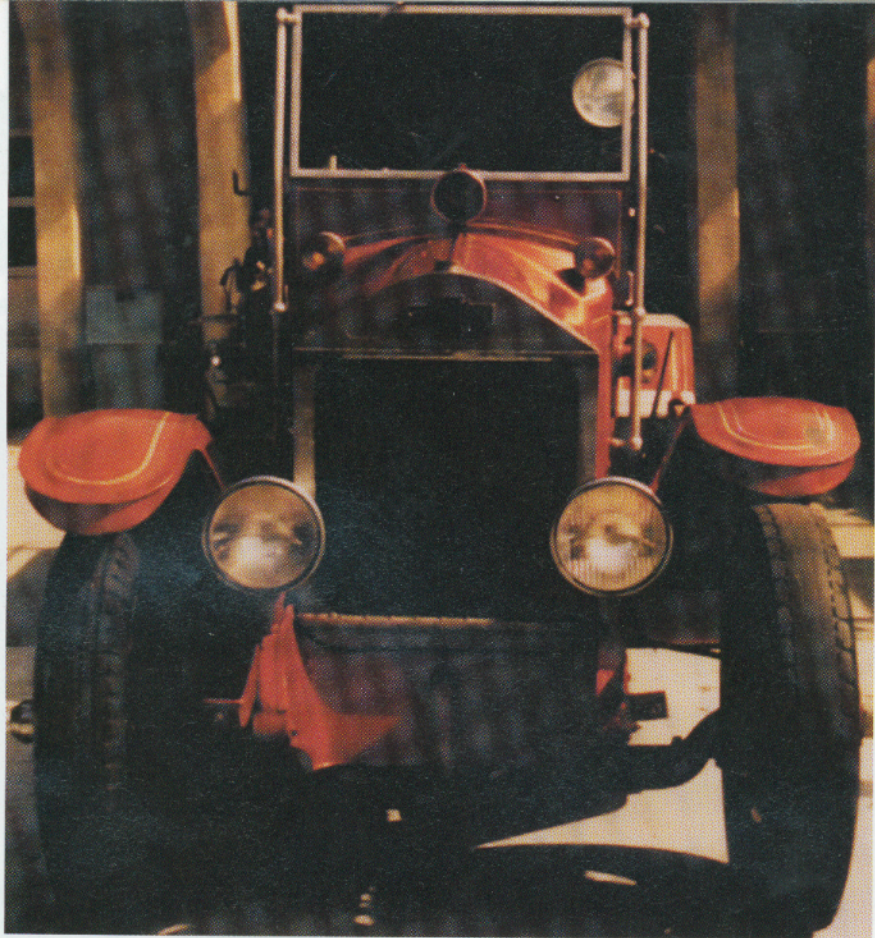
expressed support for the museum. Many people offered artifacts, photographs, and other materials to the museum as gifts or loans. These were the people who were first contacted to be part of the new friends group for Station 6. They included an Atlanta Fire Department assistant fire chief, the president of Atlanta Professional Firefighters Union Local 134, the president of the Firefighters Emerald Society of Metropolitan Atlanta, a member of the Metropolitan Fire Association, the Eastern National Co-operating Association regional manager, four NPS staff members, and several local fire service buffs.

The group first met in February 2001. A member of the NPS southeast regional interpretation staff facilitated the discussion during the subsequent April and June meetings. The early discussions focused on interpretive themes, scope of collection, visitor experiences, and possible exhibits.

INTERPRETIVE THEMES

Because of its location within the historic site, a major theme of the museum will be its role in young Martin Luther King's life and the life of his community. Wilbur Jordan, a neighborhood resident, remembers, "Anything they could do for you, they would do it. Number 6 gave blood pressures. They were the policemen and first aid before the police got there. The assistance they could give to the neighborhood they did willingly, even if you were black. It didn't make no difference."

Other themes addressed at the historic site include the role stations like No. 6 played in the community. These roles include: stations in the 1920s and 1930s often had small libraries in them that were available to the surrounding community, essentially satellite libraries; they may have been used as voting places; some stations, like No. 6, had a small store that residents could use to buy candy, soda, and other small items in the 1950s and 1960s; and often fire stations were used as "safe havens" for people seeking shelter from bad weather or other dangers.



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

A fire engine from the station's past is part of the exhibit.

VISITOR EXPERIENCES

Because Fire Station No. 6 played an important role in integrating the Atlanta Fire Department, it is a significant link to Dr. King's life. Consequently the planning team desires visitors to have four primary experiences: the station as an integral part of the Sweet Auburn community from 1894 to 1991; the "firehouse family" as a close-knit, distinct culture and community in its own right; fire stations' role in today's society; and this particular firehouse's role in Dr. King's life. Discussions have begun with the Atlanta History Center to help develop exhibits, collect and store artifacts and archival material, and partner with the site to develop the museum and these visitor experiences.

Fire Station No. 6 contributes to the historic fabric of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site and provides for the benefit, inspiration, and education of current and future generations. The museum exhibits will place the station in

the context of Dr. King's Sweet Auburn community in Atlanta in the 1930s. It will highlight the role of the fire station during segregation, the civil rights movement, and integration. Finally, it will portray the community that is the "firehouse family" and the culture that develops and supports individuals who rush into burning buildings while everyone else is fleeing the same buildings.

Fire Station No. 6 is a three-dimensional historical document with many stories to tell. Staff at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, the Atlanta Fire Department, and cooperating partners are excited about developing the museum where these stories can be told.

Carol S. Ash is the NAI Region 3 Newsletter Co-editor and a Museum Technician at Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site. She can be contacted at 450 Auburn Avenue NE, Atlanta, GA 30312, 404-331-5190 ext. 300, carol_ash@nps.gov.